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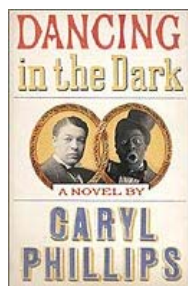
True colours

Caryl Phillips maintains a seriousness of purpose in his accomplished novelisation of the life of Bert Williams, *Dancing in the Dark*, says Tabish Khair



Tabish Khair
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Dancing in the Dark: A Novel

by Caryl Phillips

214pp, Secker and Warburg, £12.99

In his heyday, Bert Williams (1875-1922) was the highest paid entertainer in America. An elegant, reserved, widely read, light-skinned coloured man born in Antigua, he achieved fame by darkening his face with burnt cork and playing the dim-witted "coon" on Broadway and elsewhere. WC Fields once described him as "the funniest man I ever saw, and the saddest man I ever knew" and Booker T Washington credited him with having "done more for the race than I have".

Dancing in the Dark is a novel based on Bert Williams's life. We first meet him in February 1903, playing Shylock Homestead in the successful musical *In Dahomey*: "He shambles about as though unsure what to do next, as if a wrong turning has placed him upon the stage." The novel's seesaw movement through time takes us back to Williams's adolescence and forward to his death. In the process, we see him as an excellent student who disappointed his father by becoming an entertainer, as a young man touring the American backwaters as part of a medicine show, as an increasingly popular "coon" on stage, surrounded by a company of black actors and performers but never completely part of their world off-stage, as a successful businessman and a failed husband. Other stories crisscross with his - especially those of his stage partner, George Walker, and Walker's wife, Aida, Williams's wife, Lottie, and his father, a man both proud and ashamed of his son.

The novel is most forceful in the sections that make use of conflicting voices, particularly of the two main female characters, Aida and Lottie. These shifting perspectives underline the ambiguities of any lived truth: for instance, after Walker's death, we are presented with Williams both as a decent, old-fashioned man worried about his friend's widow and, from the widow's perspective, as a cuckolded, envious and sexually frustrated husband with dubious motives.

The novel's short narrative strands and multiple voices (in both first and third person) enable Phillips to move easily from fact to fiction. Real fictional extracts from news clippings and interviews, and from the original musicals and songs, wire the novelised segments together and help capture the times: "Kinky, Kinky, your skin is kind o'inky, / But I love you I do, / Shady maybe but a perfect lady / Ev'ry inch of you."

Phillips has dealt before with issues of race and identity, notably in his Commonwealth Prize-winning novel *A Distant Shore*. *Dancing in the Dark* explores the particular tensions of assuming a false identity which, in a racist society, would be considered the "true" identity of the player. This catches the performer in the double bind of using the actor's art to confirm prejudices, which then blind their audiences to that art.

If sometimes the novel - rich in background and a subtle highlighting of issues - loses in dramatic tension, this is surely inevitable in fiction based closely on facts. For while facts may be stranger than fiction they seldom follow a honed narrative sequence. One can argue that *Dancing in the Dark* underplays the active way in which Williams and Walker construed their act and sold it, even calling themselves "The Two Real Coons" in a conscious - and surely ironic - effort to distinguish themselves from the many blackface shows performed by white actors with their faces smeared with burnt cork.

But perhaps the weakest link of the novel is the prologue, which spells out the contemporary resonance of Williams's story to "bright new monied times" in which the "principal role" of coloured people is to entertain. It is only partly necessary in order to prevent us from reading Williams's story as something we have "progressed" beyond. Golliwogs, Mickey Mouse, *The Black and White Minstrel Show* are all remnants of the "coon", as is the popular tradition of coloureds as entertainers and performers but relatively seldom, even now, as "composers" or even serious "actors".

At the heart of the novel lies a question that is purposefully left unanswered: "Is the coloured performer to be forever condemned to pleasing a white audience with farce, and then attempting to conquer these same people with music and dance?" If farce is defined as excessiveness and exaggeration, then this question can also be asked of the coloured writer.

It is to Phillips's credit that he has written an interesting novel about characters and times that could have been easily exaggerated into gross entertainment, without losing a certain seriousness of purpose. Though it perhaps lacks the force of Phillips's best work, this is an accomplished novel about the tyranny of "true" colours that, not so long ago, led not only to Othello being played by blacked-up white men, but to black actors being forced to make themselves blacker in order to satisfy the preconceptions of a largely white audience.

· *Other Routes: 1,500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing*, co-edited and introduced by Tabish Khair, is published by Signal Books in October